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ABSTRACT

The consideration of the priorities for education requires careful appraisal of what a community is in the largest sense, of what constitutes a just community, and of the boundaries of education. Achieving a just community will depend both on respect for the person in all his diversity and on recognition and reaffirmation that there is a general welfare, a common destiny, in which each person has a stake and to which, by membership in the community, each person owes an allegiance. Education is only a partial creator of society; it is also a creature of the society that supports it, and requires that parents, students, and the public more generally agree on the nature of its purpose. With this in mind, four priorities in education are seen: (1) we must insist that attainment of priorities not be viewed as a guaranteed result of opportunity alone, since opportunity cannot be equated with outcome; (2) we must explore more adventurously and tenaciously what works best in the classroom and devise better ways of predicting what will work best for particular individuals; (3) recognition that children and youth should be given equal opportunity to learn must take into account that there are unequal aptitudes; and (4) the unique and important American institution, the college or university as a center for intellectual freedom, must maintain its integrity as a community of scholars, free from exploitive interests and capricious economic currents.
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Priorities for Education in a Just Community

by

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Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen and guests of the College Entrance Examination Board:

I am grateful to my old friends Steve Wright and Sid Marland for the invitation to take part in this 1976 National Forum. I feel privileged to be able to speak directly with you who are here, because your roles in education, before and after college entrance, are decisive in determining the educational welfare of multitudes of individual students, and critically important in influencing the characteristics of America's educational systems, and consequently in influencing the characteristics of all America as well.

I feel a special personal pleasure in being here with the staff of the College Entrance Examination Board during its 75th anniversary program. I grew up much aware of College Boards. My mother graduated from Vassar in 1901, and she administered the examinations from the first year they were offered in Savannah Georgia, where she lived, and there ever-after for half a century.

The theme of these meetings is "Toward a New Commitment to Education." I am asked to address "Priorities for Education in a Just Community."

This is not an easy nor simple subject, and I hope you will not deem it excessively formal if I look separately at each of the four concepts embraced by the topic, as we seek to answer the question that it implies: What should be our priorities for education in a just community?

Among my colleagues at Vanderbilt is an Old Testament scholar whose faith in the messages of the Bible runs very deep. It runs so deep that he believes that each generation requires its own translation of the Bible. He may find that the King James Version best suits his taste, but he believes that if the community of the faith is to be preserved and enlarged, the Bible must be understood contemporaneously. Old meanings may require new dress, old purposes and standards may require new meanings. In that spirit I approach our topic.

Let us reflect first on the meaning of "community". Unless we have a concept of community, community in the largest sense, we can scarcely reach agreement about how it is to be just or what place education has within it. Nor could we order priorities.

The concept of community embraces one of the many paradoxes of our time. Demands for tolerance of diversity are greater than ever, but so is the need for common goals and ideals.

These demands for tolerance of diversity are, in fact, probably greater than ever before in human experience. Taking the world at large, we know more--and it is not too much to say that we understand more--about the characteristics, origins, values, and integrity of world cultures than ever previously.

We know more than ever before about the multitudes of individuals, economic circumstances, social inheritances, beliefs, and aspirations that they comprise. The varieties of cultures are so diverse, and so possessed of their own logic, and their comparative study has been so illuminating, that the automatic answers that used to be given within one's own society about what is right, or who is right, or what differences make a difference no longer obtain. The disappearance of easy answers has been accompanied by uncertainty and loss of direction as well as by tolerance.

Gone also within the United States, and desirably so, are the ready-made pigeonholes that often used to make our daily judgements as citizens or educators routine, that imposed no requirement to define or redefine justice, or education for that matter.

To recognize the extent of the contemporary challenge to the traditional, ready-made answer, one need only remember that as late as the founding of the College Entrance Examination Board some men and women seriously debated whether women's intellectual faculties were appropriate for a college education. To be reminded of the pace of change and diversity, go to see a not-so-old film with Stepin Fetchit, or listen to a modern marriage ceremony written by the bride and groom, or watch a group of blue-jeaned teenagers, their sex not immediately apparent. Civil rights movements, women's movements, ethnic consciousness movements, youth and older people's movements have with other forces at work, brough new and diverse tastes, beliefs life-styles, even values.

Some doors of opportunity and obligation have been opened to some persons against whom they were once closed, whether because of sex, race, religion, or national origin. We now find attention given to children too young to defend themselves and to persons too old to fit earlier concepts of a productive economy.

As the circle of tolerance widens, and it should widen, we find ourselves confronting the other end of the paradox. The need for community, for common goals and common ideals, for the social glue that holds together people who are dependent upon each other, has increased. Yet the sense of community has not. We are splintered--into geographic enclaves, subcultures variously defined, tensely motivated special interest groups, combinations of egocentric personalities, including destructive gangs. The newspaper reminds us daily of the disunity of society. Few days go by without reports of terrorism, of torture, of neighborhood strife, of doors barricaded against the violent, of bitter mindless violence on rural roads and urban streets. We even read of the ultimate disintergration, of the dying victim on a sidewalk calmly, callously ignored by passersby who fear for themselves.

We see this breakdown of community in the disenchantment with education among some young people. The acute sensitivity of many young persons to what they call their "identity" is another piece of the mosaic. When such a young person asks, "Who am I?" she or he is essentially asking, "Where am I supposed to go? Where am I able to go?" These are questions about community--one's place in the scheme of things, one's relationship to other people, one's relationship to past and future. These relationships are the bedrock on which everything else rests.

In Robert Frost's poem, "The Death of the Hired Man," appears a bit of dialogue that speaks to what I mean by community. The husbands says:

> "Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
> They have to take you in."

and his wife replies:

> "I should have called it something you somehow haven't to deserve . Home is something one belongs to without having to earn his place. It is the community in microcosm, rights that one has by virtue of being a member of the human family, with trust that the bonds of humanity will be honored."

Even as our community is one of imperfect common unity, even as it is in transition--whether one means the community of humankind, or of the American states, or of a more restricted population--so the concept of a "just" community is ambiguously defined, understood, accepted.

The bedrock of community is respect for each individual in the community, belief in his ultimate dignity, regard for his personal importance. I propose that a just community is one where each individual not only belongs, but also has the chance to do the best that his capacities permit, to be to the fullest the kind of person he wants to be and to feel that he has these chances. The only limitation is the obligation not to conduct oneself in a way that denies other persons similar opportunities, that is, in a way that creates an unjust community, or in a way that removes the person himself from the community.

Perhaps this is what the Signers were saying when they subscribed to the Declaration of Independence, proclaiming that all men are created equal and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, among them life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But implementing such a concept in 1976 is very different from doing so in 1776. The increasing interconnectedness, the mutual dependence of the peoples of the world and of the peoples within our nation, compound difficulties in ways really not predictable, and certainly not anticipated by Thomas Jefferson and his colleagues.

Let us take two examples.

Technological development, multiplying populations, rapid economic and political change, and a resulting rush of social pressures strain institutions of all types and contribute to a state of flux in which yesterday's solution is not only out of date today, but may well create more of a problem than it solves.

In such a circumstance, the ability of a nation to take the long view is eroded. But if we blow up the planet, there can be no just community. If we ravage our physical resources to create an environment in which basic survival is the issue, there can be no just community. If we ravage our public financial resources so that the viability of government itself is the issue, there can be no community. Justice in a community--or educational priorities-- has little meaning to those too cold, too hungry, too ill, too frightened, too certain of early death, to care, or to have hope. Without hope-- and 1776 was a time of hope--there is nothing.

The second change in context occurring during these past 200 years is of a different order.

From the alterations that have evolved over two centuries have emerged new interpretations of what constitutes fair and equal opportunity, new meanings beyond the ken of the Founders of the United States. The concepts of equality that quickly found their way into the United States Constitution have gone through several stages of interpreted meaning. They have evolved from procedural justice, to political rights for certain classes of people, to notions of equal opportunity. The application of these concepts to previously excluded categories of people, particularly minorities as variously and increasingly broadly defined, followed. The conception of equal opportunity has broadened to newly identified groups deemed subject to discrimination, most recently and conspicuously women. Extension of the concept of equality has led to new issues.

When is it a proper expectation that government will simply remove the impediments to equal opportunity? When is it a proper expectation that government will assure equal opportunity by positive action? When is it a proper expectation that government will see that there is compensation for previous unequal opportunity? How can government practically meet an expectation that it is to be the guarantor of equal opportunity and assure redress of past injustice, and still not exceed the bounds of constitutional authority? How can the challenge of "inverse discrimination" be reconciled with the ideals of equal opportunity and an open society?

As there are conflicts of laws, so there are conflicts of rights. These conflicts confuse the effort to define cleanly a just community; in fact, they may exacerbate the devisiveness that makes a sense of community in our modern day difficult to achieve.

Achieving a just community will, then, depend both on respect for person in all its diversity, and on recognition and reaffirmation that there is a general welfare, a common destiny, in which each person has a stake, and to which by membership in the community each person owes an allegiance. Lest this seem a platitudinous truism, I relay the report given to me of the nuclear scientist who was recently asked by a reporter whether he had personal concern about nuclear wastes. I am told that his response was, "Personal? Oh, no. Nuclear wastes won't be a serious problem in my lifetime."

Our concern is priorities for education. Let me speak of education for a moment. Before addressing priorities for education we need some boundaries to the concept of education. I state three of my own before addressing what it is most important to do about education.

First, education is only a partial creator of society. It is also a creature of the society that supports it. Current disillusionment with some results of our educational systems is in part due to unrealistic expectations of what formal, institutionalized education can accomplish, either for society as a whole or for individuals. There is a limit to what can reasonably be expected from education, even education conceived from kindergarten and before, through postgraduate education and beyond, and including all types of formal processes in lifelong learning.

The students for whom the College Board designs its programs are central to the nation's destiny, but they are not the whole of the nation's destiny. Moreover, those students are the products of much more than our schools and colleges and they are tested in diverse and numerous ways. Not only is human behavior shaped by more than the human mind; the human mind is shaped by more than the organized educational processes to which it is exposed.

Second, for schools at any level to do what they were originally intended to do--promote learning--they require the larger community's political, financial, moral support. It is crucial, therefore, for parents and students and educators, and the public more generally, to agree on the nature of the process.

The philosopher Horace M. Kallen drew a distinction several decades ago between education and instruction. The latter he said is building doctrines, facts, behavior forms. Education he conceived as different. He wrote, "Education . . . is far, far less an activity of the teacher than an activity of the learner. Like eating, no one can perform it for another; each must do for himself".

Incredible as it may seem, it is not uncommon for parents at elementary and secondary levels, and students at higher levels, to assume an advesarial posture toward their educators, saying in effect: Here is the vessel to be filled, fill it. If it does not become filled, you have failed in your duty. Educators are rightfully to be held accountable for what they put on the table, but the individual is not absolved of his or her responsibility. The notion is well grounded in human experience: purposeful, aggressive effort of the student is required if learning is to be accomplished.

The third quality that I wish to mention is closely related to this last one. And I think I can best make it by quoting from an article by David Riesman in Change of last April on the graduate experience:

"The prospect of relatively easy and ever-rising affluence helped encourage hedonism among students and faculty, as elsewhere in American life. And yet an important preparation for teaching, as for many other careers, consists in developing the ability to perform a task one does not like or do especially well. Learning to endure doing something rather badly that is difficult may be thought of as the intellectual and moral equivalent to an Outward Bound program. . . . The near abolition of requirements both in high school and college allows students easily to avoid opportunities for stretching themselves in an area that may not present their optimal academic profile."

These thoughts about community, about what constitutes a just community, and about education, lead me to offer you four priorities for education. I do not suggest that these four are the only important purposes to pursue, the only things that need to be done. But, in my view, each of them is essential.

First. In ordering priorities for education in a just community, we must insist that attainment not be viewed as a guaranteed result of opportunity.

It is wise always--in certain cases it is an unassailable obligation--to strive to make up for disadvantages suffered by individuals because of the way capricious Fortune has spun her wheel: Being physically handicapped, being mentally handicapped, being a member of a disadvantaged minority, being a female if disadvantaged thereby, or whatever. Access to education, however--the right of access, which in the grand sweep of human history is also an extraordinary privilege--can not be a guarantee of results. It is literally impossible to equate opportunity and outcome. The effort to do so can severely limit both. We are obligated, if we believe that, to make it clear.

Having said this, I now emphasize certain clear responsibilities of educators. One has to do with the quality of instruction in general. Another has to do with the diversity among students.

So to my second priority.

Clearly something is wrong when evidence accumulates that competency in basic skills like writing and computation is going down. I have read with interest remarks made on this subject earlier this month in Denver by Robert G. Cameron of the College Board staff. The evidence that points to such a trend has become a cause for national concern and comment, especially but not only, among educators.

While more must be expected of individual students, more also is due from us, the schools, colleges, and universities to which students come. We must explore more adventurously and tenaciously what works best in the classroom and devise better ways of predicting what will work best for particular individuals.

The United States Government is spending this year something over $400 million for educational research of all kinds--evaluations, accountability studies, data-gathering, dissemination, training--but only a small portion of that research gives primary emphasis to research on learning. The experimental data seem to be plentiful, but they are also scattered, fragmented, and often collected under laboratory conditions that limit usefulness in actual educational settings. There seems also to be too little systematic effort to translate what is known into policy and practice.

I heard a university president say recently that changing basic educational practice usually can be done about as easily as moving a graveyard. Perhaps he was only at the end of a hard day, but we are all at times guilty, for whatever understandable reasons, of inertia. But if we are to ameliorate the problems and improve the processes of learning, the knowledge we have and the knowledge we need and do not yet have must be interpreted and communicated--not only to those who educate, but also to those whose respect and support are needed, including students and parents, public officials and tax paying citizens. I assume in this emphasis that I am undershoring a significant tradition of the College Entrance Examination Board.

Now, our third priority as educators. It concerns diversity among persons and its relationship to a just community.

If the educational system is to be itself a paradigm of a just community, some changes in our attitudes toward diversity will be required. Recognition that children and youth should be given equal opportunity to learn must take into account that there are unequal aptitudes.

I was impressed by an editorial in Science, September 26, 1975 by Bernard D. Davis of the Harvard Medical School. The comments, entitled "Social Determinism and Behavioral Genetics," argues that genetic research indicates that the old dichotomy often drawn between inheritance and environment in determining human characteristics is a false one. From birth, even before birth, the interaction of the two charts the child's route in life. Dr. Davis writes that, "We now know that most traits are determined by interaction between genes and the environment, rather than by either acting independently."

He also addresses public receptivity to this conclusion as follows:

> "Unfortunately, the idea of genetic diversity has encountered a good deal of resistance. Some egalitarians fear that its recognition will discourage efforts to eliminate social causes of educational failure, misery, and crime. Accordingly, they equate any attention to genetic factors in human behavior with the primitive biological determinism of early eugenicists and race supremacists. But they are setting up a false dichotomy, and their exclusive attention to environmental factors leads them to an equally false social determinism."

Dr. Davis argues that understanding and acceptance of genetic diversity could be "an invaluable cultural resource" and "an indispensable consideration in any approach to social equality." This is to say that neglect of behavioral genetics would deprive us of information by which we could help students and other young people maximize their potential. I believe that giving individuals a full chance to develop their own capacities is, in the end, maximizing equal opportunity.

Most of us are willing to admit that a star athlete has a genetic advantage over us, that a virtuoso violinist has innate capacities we lack. We are not so ready, however, to search closely and objectively into differences in learning patterns and natural gifts for, let us say, mathematical reasoning. Yet I read with interest about the project for identifying mathematically precocious youth at the Johns Hopkins University under the direction of Psychologist Julian C. Stanley. It is well known to the College Board and the Educational Testing Service, and I understand is unique in the United States. Through it, extremely talented youths have been identified in an annual talent search and have been dramatically accelerated in their mathematical learning. A number have moved with incredible swiftness into highly advanced work including in some cases early entrance into The Hopkins and elsewhere.

We must strip away biases that keep us from providing for the wide range of interest and talents that exist among individuals. We have not, I think, made a sufficiently concerted effort to identify at early stages those who are gifted members of particularly, minority groups. Perhaps this is true of women, too.

In addition, we have often created an undesirable school, college or university environment. Without adequate provision for them, some extremely gifted students may be thwarted in realizing their aspirations. Some other sudents may have their aspirations raised to unrealistic levels, may be encouraged in an impossible dream, and in the end suffer only frustration and discouragement, perhaps even bitterness.

I do not mean to minimize the obstacles inherent in these complicated matters. I read of students who come from cultural settings where traditional American modes of inquiry and doing research, and our usual ways of thinking about unfamiliar phenomena, are simply baffling. And I understand, too, that examinations and their uses for prediction are built on long experience and are difficult to accommodate to new assumptions, to new definitions of talent, potential, achievement, equal opportunity. But we must try and succeed.

Concepts of education, justice, and community should determine educational priorities. They should do so, at least, as those concepts call for attainment, objectivity, realism in human assessments, humaneness, and as they place a heavy burden of obligation on educators themselves to evaluate regularly their own attitudes and educational effectiveness.

There is another, different kind of educational priority, however, that requires emphasis. It is the fourth and last I shall mention.

For a moment, consider the college or university as a community of its own, a community of scholars. We have conventionally said colleges and universities in the United States are more the intellectual centers of the nation than any other type of institution. They are centers of intellectual freedom, too. To some extend they are also artistic centers. These things are not true in all parts of the world.

These uniquely important American institutions have an obligation to maintain their integrity as communities of scholars. That integrity includes making scholarship possible, and making scholarship possible includes keeping it free from special or exploitative interests, and even safe from capricious economic currents.

Scholarship is investigation. It is also preservation and transmission of knowledge. If the recipients of education should be able to maximize their potential in a just society, scholars are due the same privilege. To ask that their usefulness be measured only by research with obvious and immediate application, or only by the extend that their graduates fit into a transient employment market, would betray both our heritage of scholarship and its value to the future.

The heart of a college or university beats in the liberal and liberalizing tradition. The institution may prepare students for professions and other ways of earning a living. It has a clear opportunity and obligation to help those who go through it find a niche in the world. Its proper test nonetheless, is not an economic one.

Liberal education is more concerned with quality than quantity. The quality has signs other than today's dollar signs: its signs are the capacity to inquire, to reflect, to make judgments, to be original, to lead, to live with oneself. As life spans grow and leisure time increases, we are going to do a lot of living with ourselves. Most of all, its signs are to conceive, to create, to perpetuate, and to bring to lasting reality--I say especially this morning--the ideals of a just community.